

US mental health service is "highly fragmented"

Fred Charatan *Florida*

One in five Americans experience a mental disorder in any given year, but most of them never seek treatment, the US surgeon general, Dr David Satcher, says in a comprehensive new report.

The report, which reviews 3000 academic studies on mental health and illness, has been in preparation since Dr Satcher was appointed early in 1998. It finds that half of all Americans have a mental disorder at some time in their lives. Most do not seek treatment because of the stigma still attached to mental illness and the difficulty of paying for treatment either through insurance or from their own funds.

"The mental health system is highly fragmented," the report says, so that people who need help must often navigate a bewildering maze to get treatment.

It says that researchers have made important gains in treat-

ing mental disorders, with effective new psychotropic drugs and psychotherapy, but they need to focus more on the prevention of mental disorders. Progress in prevention has been slow because scientists do not understand enough about the causes of such illnesses.

In 1996, the last year for which figures are available, treatment of mental illness cost an estimated \$69bn (£43bn), and, in addition, \$17.7bn was spent on Alzheimer's disease and \$12.6bn on treatment for drug and alcohol misuse.

Dr Alan Tasman, president of the American Psychiatric Association, praised the report and said, "The American Psychiatric Association is especially pleased to see the attention the report pays to confidentiality, calling it the critical ingredient necessary for treatment and an



US surgeon general David Satcher presents his report on mental health to the press

effective therapeutic relationship between doctor and patient."

In calling for improved access to mental health services, Michael Faenza, president of the National Mental Health Association, said, "It's the first time

there's been this clear voice out of Washington about mental health and mental illness." □

Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General, price \$51.00, may be ordered from the Superintendent of Documents, Washington, DC.

MPs say the market for generic drugs is "ripe for manipulation"

Linda Beecham *BMJ*

A committee of MPs has criticised the present system for determining the price of generic drugs in the NHS as being "unsatisfactory." It said in a report, published last week, that the "stratospheric price rises in the past 18 months must have enriched many individuals at the expense of the NHS."

The House of Commons health select committee set up an inquiry in October 1999 to highlight the shortages and sudden sharp price rises in the cost of non-branded drugs (30 October, p 1151).

In its report, published last week, it admitted that drug price-

ing in the NHS was very complex and did not readily succumb to simplistic analysis. However, it criticised the system whereby the scarcity, and consequently the price, of generic drugs was determined by the drugs industry itself.

It disapproved of the method by which some drugs that are considered to be in short supply could be designated category D drugs, which automatically meant that the Department of Health refunded pharmacists for the full invoiced price of the drug rather than the average cost.

The system meant that it was in the interests of the industry to

hoard stocks of certain drugs, generate an artificial shortage so that the drugs were then designated category D drugs, and then sell the stocks when the price had risen. Pharmacists were prepared to pay higher prices because they were reimbursed in full. The committee said that it was "unsatisfactory" that it was the wholesalers and manufacturers who determined the levels of stocks and supply (and thus triggered category D status).

The number of generic drugs classified as category D drugs increased from 30 to 190 from September 1998 to September 1999. The committee acknowledged that the closure of Regent GM, one of the largest manufacturers of generic drugs, contributed to the shortages and the consequent price rises. But it added: "We believe that it is significant that produc-

tion levels have now returned to normal whilst prices and category D levels have remained abnormally high."

The MPs say that the category D system "rewarded all in the supply and distribution chain when products were allegedly in shortage."

These facts, the committee said, together with the limited number of manufacturers involved, all made the market "ripe for manipulation." It welcomed the fact that the government had eventually decided to instigate a wide ranging review of the operation of the generics market.

The price rises of the past 18 months, including some of more than 700%, have had an impact on GPs' and hospitals' drug budgets. West Sussex Health Authority, for example, is anticipating a £750 000 (\$1.2m) overspend. □